

Introduction to Teaching Pragmatics

The study of pragmatics explores the ability of language users to match utterances with contexts in which they are appropriate; in Stalnaker's words, pragmatics is "the study of linguistic acts and the contexts in which they are performed" (1972:383). The teaching of pragmatics aims to facilitate the learners' ability to find socially appropriate language for the situations they encounter.

Within second and foreign language studies and teaching, pragmatics encompasses speech acts, conversational structure, conversational implicature, conversational management, discourse organization, and sociolinguistic aspects of language use, such as choice of address forms. These areas of language and language use have not traditionally been addressed in language teaching curricula, leading one of our students to ask if we could teach him "the secret rules of English."

Pragmatic rules for language use are often subconscious, and even native speakers are often unaware of pragmatic rules until they are broken (and feelings are hurt or offense is taken). Pragmatics does not receive the attention in language teacher education programs that other areas of language do. Nevertheless, rules of language use do not have to be "secret rules" for learners or teachers. A growing number of studies exist that describe language use in a variety of English-speaking communities, and these studies have yielded important information for teaching pragmatics. (See, for example, Bardovi-Harlig 1996, 1999, 2001; Kasper and Schmidt 1996; Kasper and Rose 1999; Rose and Kasper 2001.)

From the teacher's perspective, the observation of how speakers do things with words has demystified the pragmatic process at least to the point where we can provide responsible, concrete lessons and activities to language learners. We are in the position to give assurance that they can learn pragmatics in their second or foreign language and be "in the club" of English speakers.

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Why teach pragmatics in language classes?

We advocate teaching pragmatics because, quite simply, observation of language learners shows there is a demonstrated need for it, and instruction in pragmatics can be successful.

Second and foreign language learners show significant differences from native speakers in language use, in particular, the execution and comprehension of certain speech acts; conversational functions, such as greetings and leave takings; and conversational management, such as back channeling and short responses. Without instruction, differences in pragmatics show up in the English of learners regardless of their first language background or language proficiency. That is to say, a learner of high grammatical proficiency will not necessarily show equivalent pragmatic development. As a result, learners at the higher levels of grammatical proficiency often show a wide range of pragmatic competence. Thus, we find that even advanced nonnative speakers are neither uniformly successful, nor uniformly unsuccessful, but the range is quite wide.

The consequences of pragmatic differences, unlike the case of grammatical errors, are often interpreted on a social or personal level rather than as a result of the language learning process. Being outside the range of language use allowed in a language, or making a pragmatic mistake, may have various consequences. A pragmatic error may hinder good communication between speakers, may make the speaker appear abrupt or brusque in social interactions, or may make the speaker appear rude or uncaring. Unintentional insult to interlocutors and denial of requests have been identified as other potential pragmatic hazards.

What makes pragmatics “secret” seems to be in some cases insufficient specific input and in other cases insufficient interpretation of language use. Language classrooms are especially well suited to provide input and interpretation. Instruction addresses the input problem by making language available to learners for observation. Some speech acts, such as invitations, refusals, and apologies, often take place between individuals, so learners might not have the opportunity to observe such language without being directly involved in the conversation. Some speech events are generally not observed by a third party, but

closed events need not be as private as going to the doctor. A person might want to know the conventions for talking to a hair stylist in a second language, something equally difficult to observe!

The second problem of input that instruction addresses is salience. Some necessary features of language and language use are quite subtle and not immediately noticeable by learners, such as the turns that occur before speakers actually say “goodbye” and the noises they make when encouraging other speakers to continue their turns. Differences in making requests, such as by saying “Can I?” (speaker-oriented) instead of “Can you?” (hearer-oriented) might not be immediately salient to learners. By highlighting features of language and language use, instruction can inform the learner.

Finally, the classroom is the ideal place in which to help learners interpret language use. Instruction can help learners understand when and why certain linguistic practices take place. It can help learners to better comprehend what they hear (“What does this formula mean?”) and to better interpret it (“How is this used?” “What does a speaker who says this hope to accomplish?”). A classroom discussion of pragmatics is also a good place to explore prior impressions of speakers. For example, Americans are often thought of as being very direct. Instruction provides the opportunity to discuss the absence of some types of politeness markers in English and the presence and function of others that may not be immediately recognizable to learners.

What are the goals of teaching pragmatics?

The chief goal of instruction in pragmatics is to raise learners’ pragmatic awareness and give them choices about their interactions in the target language. The goal of instruction in pragmatics is not to insist on conformity to a particular target-language norm, but rather to help learners become familiar with the range of pragmatic devices and practices in the target language. With such instruction, learners can maintain their own cultural identities, participate more fully in target language communication, and gain control of the force and outcome of their contributions. Exposing learners to pragmatics in their second or foreign language

helps the learners to expand their perception of the target language and those who speak it.

The classroom provides a safe place within which learners can try out new forms and patterns of communication in an accepting environment. They can experiment with unfamiliar forms of address. The instructor and other student participants can provide feedback. Instruction should allow students to choose how much of the pragmatic norms of the culture they would like to include in their own repertoire. They will also enjoy greater insights into the target culture. Equally important, we believe that students genuinely enjoy learning about pragmatics because it is like being let into a secret!

How can pragmatics be taught?

We emphasize that there is not a single best way to teach pragmatics. Regardless of method, however, activities should share two important pedagogical practices: 1) authentic language samples are used as examples or models, and 2) input precedes interpretation or production by learners.

Instruction in pragmatics may utilize the learners' first language as well as the target language. Awareness raising activities can profitably involve demonstrations in L1 or L2 samples. Demonstrations may include the use of space, such as where people stand in a line, or nonverbal gestures that accompany certain types of talk, such as shaking hands during greetings or introductions. L1 language samples can serve to introduce learners to ideas in pragmatics in a context in which they have native control of the language. The samples can also serve as the basis of L1-L2 comparisons. All languages have pragmatic systems, and with a little encouragement all learners will recognize that their native language also has "secret rules."

Pragmatics can be integrated into the English language curriculum at the earliest levels: There is no reason to wait to introduce learners to the pragmatics of a second language. In fact, the imbalance between grammatical and pragmatic development may be ameliorated by early attention to pragmatics in instruction.

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